

The Problem of Death in East and West

Immortality, Eternal Life, Unbornness

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THE HIGHEST DEATH is to die without having thought about it in advance," writes Montaigne (*Essais*). It might be possible for some to ignore death by *not* thinking of it and *not* questioning its meaning. Again, even if one knows that death is inescapable, one might not dwell on it, but rather think primarily of life and seek after life. A death met precisely in the midst of the earnest pursuit of life and unconcern for death may be called the highest death. The present age is one of fulfillment and enjoyment of life. Nevertheless, due to the appearance of absolute weapons, the present age has at the same time become an age of anxiety over death and of nihilism. Indeed, does not anxiety and nihilism characterize humankind's present existential situation? People grieve over the fact that they must die, rather than over death itself. This brings to mind Pascal's profound words: "Death is easier to endure for the man who does not think of it than for the person who, though he is not directly in danger of dying, still thinks about it" (*Pensées*). For animals, even if there is "the fact of death," there is no "problem of death." Only for humans, who consciously face "the fact of death," does it become an intense "problem."

Consequently, wherever man has existed, in the East and the West,

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there have appeared various self-conscious attitudes toward death, and different ways of solving the problem of death have been proposed. Just as only humans question death, it appears that only humans can truly experience death. Only those who truly die can truly live. Self-consciousness of dying is then ultimately bound up with self-consciousness of living. Among the various forms of the self-awareness of death in human history, I would like to take up the notions of the immortality of the soul, eternal life, and unbornness as the most fundamental understandings of the problem of death realized by human beings.

I

The idea that the soul does not die even though the body perishes has arisen in people's minds since ancient times. This widely shared idea is perhaps crystallized in its purest form and attains an extremely profound "self-awareness of death" in Plato's doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

To Plato, death is nothing other than the release of the imperishable soul from the perishable body. Death is the separation of soul from the body: the body separates from the soul and becomes body only. The soul separates from the body and becomes the pure soul itself (*Phaedo* 64c). The body (*sōma*) is frequently likened to the tomb (*sēma*) of the soul (*Gorgias* 493a). From such a point of view it can be said that for Plato, death is not the body entering the tomb; on the contrary, it is the release of the soul from the tomb of the body. Through death, the soul rids itself of the bonds of the flesh and becomes pure; it returns to itself, eternal and imperishable. Consequently, the true *philosophos* longs for death, and believing in happiness after death (*Phaedo* 64a), faces death calmly. The philosopher believes that apart from the realm of the dead, he cannot encounter that which is his own *raison d'être*, the attainment of pure wisdom.

The death of Plato's teacher, Socrates, seems to have functioned as a very powerful force behind this kind of self-consciousness of death in Plato. His self-awareness of death was in fact conjoined with a clear concept of the immortality of the soul.

Yet the concept of the immortality of the soul is not peculiar to Plato. It is found in the Orphic religion of his day, and also in the Pythagorean school. The Pythagoreans, however, understood the

soul as not being itself eternal and imperishable, but as eternal because it transmigrates from one body to another. Within that limitation, the soul could live forever by depending on the body, without being eternal in itself. In Plato, on the other hand, the soul is understood as eternal in itself, preceding the body and independent of the body. It is seen as having the character of "something divine, immortal, that which becomes the object of intellect, has a simple form, indivisible, a permanent existence that never changes the way of being of itself" (ibid., 80b). Plato believes that the soul is apart from the body, eternal and immortal in itself. But Plato can also be said to recognize the fact of transmigration of the soul when he says that the soul changes many bodies like a tailor who replaces his old worn-out coats (ibid., 87d). Plato's concept of the immortality of the soul, however, still differs from that of the Pythagorean school. In Plato's case, it is not that the soul is immortal and eternal because it changes bodies, but that it is able to transmigrate precisely because it is immortal and eternal in essence.

At this point, we can see that the Platonic soul possesses the character of Platonic Ideas. The soul partakes of eternal existence. It exists not through the body but through itself. Transcending all change and birth and death, it partakes of the transcendent nature of the Ideas which always exist in themselves. It differs in essence from the body, which is subject to change, birth and death, and which does not possess a permanent nature in itself. At the root of Plato's theory of immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*, his theory of Ideas is clearly evident; without a grasp of his theory of Ideas it would be impossible to understand his concept of the immortality of the soul. He sought that which is invisible beyond the visible and phenomenal, the permanent and unchanging above and beyond whatever changes, the pure and simple behind the many, and the eternal and imperishable beyond the perishable. This is the reason he distinguished the Ideas from the phenomenal. In Plato's case, discussion of the soul, which is imperishable by transcending the death of the body, at the same time entails the imperishability of the Ideas. To clarify the immortality of the soul is to prove the existence of the Ideas, and conversely the immortality of the soul is demonstrated from the existence of the Ideas. This point, Plato's clear grasp of the Idea-like character of the soul, may be considered the reason why Plato differs from the Pythagoreans and

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goes a step beyond them, even though they both teach the same immortality of the soul.

This point can be clearly read within Plato's argument developed through the mouth of Socrates, in his response to the doubt raised by Cebes, himself a student of the Pythagorean school. The argument can be called the climax of *Phaedo*. Cebes' doubt is as follows. He recognizes that the soul is stronger and longer lasting than the body and transmigrates through many lives, but this does not necessarily prove *the immortality of the soul itself*. For the possibility remains that the soul gradually deteriorates as it passes through many transmigrations and, finally, in a "death" somewhere along the line, it completely perishes. If no one can know of the "death" which brings final extinction to the soul, and unless the soul can be proven to be immortal and imperishable in the perfect sense, who could prove that a belief which precludes the fear of death is not the result of foolishness? (ibid., 88a, b). Against this keen doubt, which perhaps is grounded in the thought of the Pythagorean school, Plato has Socrates make the following rebuttal.

Just as everything beautiful is beautiful by means of "Beauty in itself," so too a Form exists for everything and is called the same name as the Form by virtue of participating in this Form. Thus, while the number three does not oppose "even numbers," it does not partake of "even numbers." For three has as its form "oddness" which is opposed to "even numbers." Again, fire is not directly opposed to "cold" but does not partake of "coldness," for fire has the form of "hotness" which is the opposite of "coldness." Similarly, the soul itself which brings life to the body by occupying it is not directly opposed to "death" but, as the principle of life, it does not partake of death. According to this logic, the soul must possess a character opposite to "death," namely, "death-less-ness." Consequently when death invades a man, his mortal part dies, but his immortal part, ceding the place to "death," goes away while it itself is not affected nor does it perish (ibid., 100b-106e).

As is plainly evident in this rebuttal to Cebes' argument, immortality for Plato is essential to the soul and is grounded in his theory of Ideas. Accordingly, in Plato's case, his self-consciousness of death must also be said to be based on his theory of Ideas. Death is neither something like a dream wherein every kind of sensation has merely disappeared,

nor is it the extinction of existence. It is precisely death which brings about distinction between Ideas and phenomena by the separating of soul and body. Conversely, in death, the immortal soul and the realm of Ideas become manifest.

Yet as long as we are living, the soul exists together with the body; and as long as it exists together with the body, the soul cannot purely know the realm of Ideas. Rather, when housed in the body, the soul often goes astray, becomes confused, and is deceived. In order to realize the truth of things and attain to their reality, the soul must strive to become pure soul itself, without being agitated by anything physical—neither hearing, nor sight, nor sufferings and pleasures (ibid., 65c). Only when the soul gets rid of bodily contamination and becomes pure, and simply contemplates things by itself, does it have a relation with the permanent and immutable Ideas, and preserves a permanent and immutable way of being itself. This condition of the soul is called wisdom (*phrónēsis*) (ibid., 79d). Clear knowledge or pure thinking can only be attained by the pure soul uninfected by the corruption of the body. But it is precisely death that releases the soul from the bonds of the body and makes it free and pure. Consequently, the philosopher, the lover of wisdom, must of course be one who does not fear death. If a man grieves and becomes afraid when facing death, he is not a philosopher who loves and pursues wisdom; he would be someone attached to the body, perhaps one who loves money and fame as well (ibid., 98b,c). The task towards which the philosopher in the true sense strives is nothing other than to go to death and complete it. He is one who “practices dying” (ibid., 64a, 67c). This is, for Plato, the understanding of wisdom and the soul, and also the way of the philosopher.

II

In Plato's case, however, immortality of the soul does not merely pertain to life after death. It is at the same time related to a person's life prior to birth. Plato firmly believes that as long as it is immortal, the soul exists apart from the body even before it dwells among us. Plato's fundamental standpoint is that the soul has an existent nature akin to the transcendent nature of the Ideas, and a permanent nature apart from the body. The soul's pre-existence is proven by the theory of

recollection (*anámnesis*), but here too we see that the immortality of the soul is grounded in the theory of Ideas.

Plato already in the *Meno* (81d) held the position that learning is actually nothing but recollecting. In the *Phaedo*, he grasps recollection as the function that recognizes the Ideas to be essentially different from individual things which come into being and pass away, and attempts thereby to prove the pre-existence of the soul. In other terms, the Idea of "Equality in itself" is completely different in essence from any "equal thing." Indeed, when we have known that two stones are equal through sensation, we have known "Equality in itself" by taking the sensation of "equal things" as occasion. In such a way, is not embracing *B* in the mind on the occasion of perceiving *A*, an act of recollection? Such Ideas as "Equality in itself," "The Good in itself," and "The Beautiful in itself" are recollected in this way by taking sensation of individual things as *occasions*: but still the sensation of individual things does not *ground* the reality of the Ideas. Those which we grasp through sensation are merely imperfect things, from which "Equality in itself" and "the Good in itself" cannot be extracted. Sensation of individual things is only an occasion that causes that which cannot be grasped immediately in itself to be only indirectly recollected; but the Ideas, on the contrary, precede things and constitute their ground. In other words, the Ideas are certainly recognized by taking the sensation of individual things as occasion, but things sensed can rather be called "equal things" or "good things" in reference to those Ideas. If we consider that what is known by recollection in this way—for example, "Equality in itself"—becomes the standard in terms of which a judgment is made that things sensed are truly equal to one another, it should be clear that the Ideas precede individuals.

The soul must, therefore, have knowledge of what "Equality in itself" and "Good in itself" is before we begin to use the senses, that is, prior to birth; and consequently it must be said that the soul necessarily has existed even prior to our being born, and has pre-existed with such knowledge of the Ideas. This is the reason Plato has Socrates say that "The soul has existed separate from the body even before dwelling in the form of man, and had power of knowledge" (*Phaedo* 76c). Recollection is nothing other than the fact that the soul, while possessing such knowledge prior to birth, has lost it when it comes to be born, and later on regains that former knowledge through the clues of sensa-

tion. Recollection is neither a mere association of ideas nor a calling up of the remembrances of the past. It is the soul's returning to itself, and the intuition of the Ideas thereby. Recollection always takes sensation of individual things as occasion, but therein the realm of Ideas comes to be called up within the soul.

In this way Plato asserted not only the immortality of the soul after death but its pre-existence before birth as well. This assertion was based on his belief in the eternal and immutable nature of the soul which transcends the birth, death, and changes of the body. I have already mentioned that Plato's theory of the immortality of soul is based on this Idea-like nature of the existence of the soul. But Plato did not merely seek the eternal and the immutable in the past or future. Rather, he sought it within the present. He neither wished for the immortality of the world after death by fleeing the present reality, nor yearned for the purity of the world prior to birth through recollection. He attempted to live in purity of soul while possessing a body within present reality. This is why Plato says that the true philosopher "practices dying." For Plato, to philosophize meant to purify (*katharsis*) the soul bound by the body within the present reality of this world from bodily corruption, to make the soul pure while it exists with the body, and thus to think the world of Ideas. For Plato, who holds that death brings about release of the soul from the prison of the body, to philosophize is nothing other than precisely to "practice dying" while living. It is to live through dying, to practice dying while living. Herein is the way of the philosopher for Plato—the way in which death is overcome.

In Plato, the question of death is certainly grasped subjectively and practically, but it is clear that at its root there is a kind of dualism of body and soul, and a two-world theory which separates the world of phenomena and the world of Ideas. Immortality of the soul is also grasped through pure thinking and *anamnēsis* while the soul has a body in this world, but it ultimately is based on the world of Ideas in the background of present reality. Even if it is said that the Ideas appear within present reality, it is still held that they transcend present reality. In that respect his standpoint is one of an a-temporal, a-historical eternity, of eternity in the sense of endlessness (*Unendlichkeit*). Accordingly his self-consciousness of death, no matter how subjectively it is grasped, still retains that which is seen objectively.

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III

In contrast to this view, there is a standpoint which does not view the relation between body and soul dualistically, as in Plato, or teach immortality on the basis of considering death as the separation of soul from body. Instead it grasps the body and soul as a unity and believes in the death of man—who is this unity of body and soul—and his *eternal life*. Let us now turn our attention to the self-consciousness of death in Christianity as the teaching which, while assuming this standpoint, has developed a very profound religious nature.

Even among the Hebrews there were words such as *rûah* and *nephesh* to express the spirit distinguished from the flesh (*bāsār*), and to express the spirit after death. Spirit and body are not, however, understood as entities dualistically opposed, as in the case of Plato. They are considered an organic unity. Man is simultaneously soul and body. Therefore there is no concept corresponding to the Greek idea that the body is the prison of the soul and death the separation of the soul from the body. In his book, *What is Man?* Wolfhart Pannenberg states: "In the sense of the concept that a part of man continues beyond death in an unbroken way, the idea of immortality cannot be held. . . . The inner life of our consciousness is so tied to our corporeal functions that it is impossible for it to be able to continue by itself alone" (pp. 49-50). For the Hebrews, people descended after death to the netherworld as both body and soul. The one sleeping in the grave is not the soul of the dead person, but the deceased himself. Thus it would seem natural that body and soul are considered as a unity both in life and death in the Judaic-Christian standpoint which understands a person as a creature of God. For the Christians, since both soul and body originate in the creation of God, the body is not the prison of the soul but rather a "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19). What must be essentially distinguished in Christianity is not soul and body, but God and man.¹

¹ The Greek word corresponding to *nephesh* is *psyche*. In the Bible, *nephesh* expresses the life which is in creatures, that is, soul, and it is often translated into Japanese as *inochi* (life). In contrast, the Greek term corresponding to *rûah* is *pneûma*; *rûah* indicates life which has been given by God that is spirit. The Greek term corresponding to *bāsār* is *sarx*, besides which in the New Testament, the word *sōma* is used to express the body.

Since these terms are not necessarily used in a single sense throughout the Bible, we

For Christianity, the life of a person is grasped not as a substantial entity that exists in itself, but as something in vital connection with God the creator. For the prophets of the Old Testament, when the God Jehovah turns away his face, it signifies his wrath and judgment (Jer. 44:11, Ezek. 15:7). In contrast to this, when God and man meet face to face, God and man are related not only vitally but personally. The God who speaks therein is like a person, and man who answers is also a person. This relation between God and man is linked by the *word*. Indeed, death for man is nothing other than a severance of this vital and personal link with God. For the people of the Old Testament, death in fact cut off the bond between God and person rather than between person and person, and one fears death not because of returning to nothingness but because the relation with God is sundered.

In Christianity, indeed, the origin of sin lies in human disobedience to God, and rebellion against the *word* of God constitutes the essence

must be careful in interpreting them. Yet in the Bible, body (*sōma*) and soul (*psyche*) are not understood as dualistically opposed, as in the case of Greek philosophy (again, meanings implied in these terms are not the same as in the case of Greek philosophy). A conspicuous feature of Hebraism is that the body is the expression of the soul and both are understood as a unity.

However, Paul saw in man a duality of what is corruptible, namely, flesh (*sarx*), and what is incorruptible, namely, spirit (*pneuma*); the former he calls "the outer man," and the latter "the inner man" (2 Cor. 4:16, Rom. 7:22). In this way he establishes a dualism of body and soul (*sōma* and *psyche*), the body belonging to the outer man, as things pertaining to natural life in general, and the soul to the inner man, namely, the spirit (*pneuma*), that is linked to God. Thus, he says, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God" (Rom. 8:7), so the flesh that is the power of sin and death wars in man with the spirit, and "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:5). It must be fully borne in mind, however, that this Pauline teaching of the dualistic complication of spirit and flesh is one in which man still lives in relation to God, even as man, having both inner and outer natures, feels the tension of whether to entrust to himself to and follow the Holy Spirit that is the creative power of God; the Pauline teaching remains essentially different from Plato's philosophy where we find an opposition of soul and body without the relation to a transcendent personal God.

Thus in Paul, in contrast to the fact that for one who lives following the flesh, as neither the body (*sōma*) nor the soul (*psyche*) as things that are "perishable" (1 Cor. 15:42), namely, as comprising the animate body (*sōma psychikon*), can avoid death, it is promised that for one who follows the Spirit of God, and in whom dwells the spirit of Christ, the body (*sōma*) will become "the temple of the Holy Spirit" and "member of Christ" (1 Cor. 6:15), and after death will rise again as a spiritual body (*sōma pneumatikon*).

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of sin. Accordingly, it is natural that, due to committing the sin of rebelling against God's word, it is ordained that man must die by the severance of his vital bond with God based on the word. Loss of the relation with God is nothing other than the result of sin. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23) may be thought truly to have had this meaning. Original life is uncorrupt as something given from God; consequently, death menaces people not as something natural but only as the result of sin. Herein lies the distinct characteristic of the self-consciousness of death in Christianity.

For the Christian, then, "death" has at least two meanings. First, death severs the vital and personal bond with God the creator. Second, death is repayment for the sin of rebelling against God and is the judgment given by God for sin.

First, a fear of death is expressed throughout the Old and New Testaments. The reverse side of the fear of death would seem to be attachment to life. However, the attachment to life which appears in the Bible is essentially different from the attachment to life which many modern men exhibit. It is not attachment to life itself, but rather an attachment in the sense of a person not wanting to lose the fundamental bond with God, the creator of his or her own life. To fall into the hands of death is to be abandoned by God. Even Jesus, faced with death in the garden of Gethsemane, was "greatly distressed and troubled" and complained to his disciples that "my soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (Mark 14:33-34). On the cross he emitted the sorrowful cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). At that point, Jesus' death is the diametrical opposite of Socrates who, conceiving of death as the soul entering the world of Ideas by being released from the body, calmly accepted the hemlock and personally practiced the philosophy of the immortality of the soul. Even Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, "Yet not what I wilt, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36), did not mean that his fear of death had gone, but seems to mean that if this most horrendous death derives from God's will, he would dare to obey it too.² Since Jesus as the son of God is more profoundly linked to God than anyone else, he feels the fear of death which would cut him off from God more deeply than any other man.

² Oscar Cullman, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 22.

Precisely because he obeys the will of God to the very end, he accepts his death. Even for Christ who put all his enemies under his feet, death is truly "the last enemy" to be feared (1 Cor. 15:26).

Second, however, death is not merely the last enemy for man, but at the same time is "the wages of sin." The body, too, which is the subject of desires and evanescently perishes, is not something evil in itself, but has only come to have the fate of such destruction as the result of sin. The sin of Adam who disobeyed the word of God extends to the whole of existence of man who is a unity of soul and body, and death also extends to all creatures as the result of that sin. "Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, so death spread to all men because all men sinned" (Rom. 5:12). In Christianity, death is essentially linked to sin. Death does not become problematic merely in itself. What becomes problematic is not death as death, but death as sin.

This is a theme which is completely absent in the Greek Platonic philosophy. It can be said that in Plato, too, death is not treated as a problem merely in itself. What becomes problematic for Plato is not death as death—even less is it death as sin—but death as release of the soul to the world of Ideas. Death is not repayment for sin enjoined by God, but the release of the soul from the body in order for it to return to the realm of the pure Ideas. Therein death does not pertain to the soul but only to the body; similarly, evil does not pertain to the soul but only to the body. Evil exists in the sensory, and not within the Idea-like soul. Though evil is due to an absence of the soul and insufficiency of education, it is not personal sin—even less is it personal sin as rebellion against the will of the creator. In Plato, death, as that which causes release of the immortal soul to the realm of the ideas, has a positive meaning—this is precisely the reason why Socrates met death calmly—but the problem of human evil is only negatively understood. Consequently, even if there is pure yearning for the realm of Ideas by transcending even death, there is no consciousness of personal sin by subjective individuals. Therefore, although death becomes the moment which causes the world of Ideas to become manifest, it is not linked to sin.

In Christianity, on the contrary, death is in all respects the result of sin as rebellion against the word of God. The fact that man, the creature of God, instead of believing and obeying the word of God,

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becomes an autonomous existence independent of God and freely willing—that is, that man becomes man himself—is the insolence (*hybris*) of man. Death, the severance of the vital bond with God, is enjoined by God as repayment for this sin. Without sin there would be no death in which the vital bond with God is severed. Thus in Christianity, death is not something which pertains only to the body and not the soul, as in the case of Platonic philosophy. It pertains to the whole being of man. The consciousness of “sin” which causes man to die is linked to the very self-consciousness of human autonomous existence. Therein differing from Plato’s philosophy, death in Christianity is grasped as a problem truly pertaining to a person’s entire being—moreover, within the personal dialogue with God the absolute, as a problem pertaining to the deepest source of human nature.

IV

How is death conquered in Christianity? It cannot be separated from the faith which believes in the fact of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The belief that Jesus is the incarnation of the *Word* of God, that human sins are redeemed through his death on the cross, and that the severed relationship between God and man is also restored through his death and resurrection may be called the kernel of Christian faith. That Jesus Christ conquers sin and death in this world through his crucifixion and resurrection, becoming the complete victor, and that thus a new age is begun, is the belief which runs throughout the New Testament. According to Karl Barth, the significance of Christ’s death is that on the one hand it is the curse, judgment, and protest of God, but at the same time the sanction, sacrifice, and victory of God.³

1. Christ’s crucifixion, death, and burial (*sepultus*) signify that as a man, Jesus took upon himself and personally experienced the suffering of death as repayment for sin. There may be nothing which more vividly makes us ponder the severity of the suffering of death than Christ’s agonized cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” However, according to Barth, Jesus’ death is “the self-sacrifice of God

³ Karl Barth, *Credo: Die Hauptprobleme der Dogmatik dargestellt im Anschluss an das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis* (Dritte Auflage, München: C. Kaiser, 1935), p. 75.

for the existence and destiny of man.”⁴ Christ’s crucifixion is nothing other than the deepest form of the hidden God. The Son of God “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,” and again “humbling himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6-8). Christ’s crucifixion is indeed God’s own judgment upon himself, and at the same time the judgment given for the sin of people *in Christ*. Only as something crushed by the anger of God in Jesus Christ does man himself become self-conscious of his sin. The hidden God is for man the face of death.

2. However, at the same time, in the crucifixion of Christ, God empties himself and embraces within himself even human unpardonable original sin, and by causing his only son to die accomplishes redemption of sin in man’s place. This is nothing other than reconciliation with God. The painful concealment of the cross where he himself agonized is the revelation of the absolute mercy of God who is hidden in Christ. The absolute death in which God himself takes on the sin and blame of man is absolute life. Jesus’ death, indeed, signifies the revelation of true life as eternal life which is now immortal. This is the resurrection of Christ.

Belief in Jesus is nothing other than belief in the fact of his death and resurrection. In Jesus Christ, death is for the first time converted into life. Faith entails the fact of continuous dying together with the crucifixion. “Let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whosoever would save his life will lose it, and whosoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:34-35). By taking up one’s own cross and “being buried with Christ”—that is the meaning of baptism—the Christian also participates in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Barth writes: “God became mortal man in Jesus Christ, restored the destruction of the relation with man in his obedience, and in his death carried man’s sin and eternal death which is its result. . . . Precisely this God is the immortal God with whom man can be united in death, . . . is the hope of all men.” Again: “God assumed the death of man through Jesus Christ, caused him to have immortality, and gave eternal life.”⁵

Karl Rahner, although with somewhat different connotations, also

⁴ Barth, p. 78.

⁵ Luyten, Portmann, Jaspers, Barth: *Unsterblichkeit* (Basel: F. Reinhardt, 1957), p. 50.

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states, "The mystery of the Incarnation must be in God himself, and precisely in the fact that, although he is immutable in and of himself, he *himself* can become something in another."⁶ "The *Logos became* man—the history of the becoming of his human reality became *his own* history—our time became the time of the eternal One—our death became the death of the immortal God himself."⁷

In Christianity both life and death, and eternal life as their conquest, is grasped in all aspects in relation with God. Death is not the release of the soul from the prison of the body, as in Plato. It is a severance of the vital and personal bond with God the creator, a severance as the result of sin which is rebellion against the word of God. Moreover, in Plato's case, the conquering of death appears within the way of the philosopher who, while firmly believing in the immortality of soul that has an Idea-like transcendent nature, purifies the soul while in the bonds of the body, and practices dying while living. In the case of Christianity, through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus as the redemption of sin, the severed relation with God is restored and a new life is received that is established by transcending even death. It is not a philosophical self-consciousness of the immortality of the Idea-like soul, but faith in the resurrection of the dead as the righteousness of God—faith in eternal life based on the restoration of one's relation with God.

For the Christian who is self-conscious of the fact that he is determined to die because of sin, the possibility of *anámnesis* which is a return to eternal essence, to pure soul, would seem to be ultimately inconceivable. The Christian is profoundly self-conscious that an eternal essence which conquers evil and death cannot be discovered within himself. The Christian participates in the eternal not by recollection (*anámnesis*) but by revelation (*Offenbarung*). Only through Jesus Christ as the revelation of the word of God does a person recover the link with eternal life that has been lost as the result of sin. "The word of God that was in the beginning, the word of God who creates us, comes to us again as Jesus Christ. . . . However, not as the human

⁶ K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. 221.

⁷ Rahner, p. 220.

possibility of *anamnēsis* but as the divine possibility of *restitutio imaginis*.¹⁸

That this *restitutio imaginis* (restoration of the image) is possible, needless to say, has been demonstrated by the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Christian "resurrection" differs in essence from the Platonic "immortality of soul." Just as death in Christianity is not merely the perishing of the body but death as unity of soul and body, so too the Christian resurrection is not merely resurrection of the soul, but of the dead person who is a unity of soul and body. As Paul says, "Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body" (Phil. 3:21), it is not a bodiless Idea, but resurrection as a "spiritual body." Consequently the resurrection is not merely the overcoming of the bodily nature, but of death itself. It is the receiving of a new life by conquering death. The resurrection is the work of God (for example, 1 Cor. 15:15-16), and is not something demonstrable by pure philosophic thought. It is the fact that the entire existence of a person is rescued from death by the working of a new creation by God. For the Christian, the hope of resurrection is not based on any kind of speculation—philosophical or apocalyptical—but to the very end is based on the fact of Christ's resurrection. Jesus Christ is not merely a man, but "the man" who represents all people, the second Adam, and in his resurrection all humankind fundamentally conquers death. This is the reason it is written: "Death has been swallowed up by victory. O death, where is thy victory? Death, where is thy sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55-56). The history of the human fall begins from the first Adam. But the sin of humankind is redeemed, death as the "wages" of sin is conquered, and a new age is begun by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the second Adam. "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22). This is the definite significance of the historical incidents of Christ's death and resurrection.

V

However, it is not that all of humankind immediately lives again and receives a "glorious body" together with the resurrection of Christ. In Christ's resurrection, it has been demonstrated *in principle* that death

¹⁸ Emil Brunner, *Eternal Hope*, tr. Harold Knight (Westminster Press, 1954). p. 106.

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can be conquered. Christ truly is its "first fruits" (1 Cor. 15:23), and a new age *has begun* in Christ. Neither does the Christian, who believes that death has been fundamentally conquered in Christ's resurrection, by his faith change immediately from corruptible body into an incorruptible one, or from perishable body to the "glorious body." The resurrection does not occur immediately after the death of each person. It must be awaited until the end of time when Christ will come again. In his second coming, Christ "will judge the living and the dead" (1 Pet. 4:5). At this end of time, the hidden Christ will reveal his complete power and glory, and before his judgment all the deeds done within history will be openly judged and will be realistically repayed according to the reality of faith or non-faith. The believers will arise from the dead, and attaining "glorious bodies" will rise again and receive eternal life; the unbelievers will be handed over to eternal punishment. Therefore, the last judgment for the Christian is a hope rather than fear. The Christian is presently living in the "middle-time" (*Zwischenzeit*) between this resurrection of Christ (the beginning of the new age) and the second coming (its end).

For the Christian who is living in this middle-time, however, the hope in the resurrection in the end of time is hardly a contentless, empty hope. For those who believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ "are buried together with Christ through baptism into death," and this is entirely "so that as Christ was raised from the dead . . . we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). In other words, in baptism the Christian does not believe in the fact of Christ's death and resurrection as a mere object, but he dies together with Christ, and lives together with Christ. The following famous words of Paul would seem to express this fact most powerfully: "I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh, I have to live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). For Paul, baptism was not merely being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, but being baptized *into Christ* (Gal. 3:27). This is the reason that one dies together with Christ and participates in his resurrection. Here we realize the existence of a *mystical experience* which is not restricted to what is called faith. The "old man" has been crucified together with Christ (Rom. 6:6) and is revived as the "new man" created in the image of God (Eph. 4:13-14; Col. 3:10).

For the Christian, therefore, it is precisely dying together with Christ that is the beginning of resurrection into eternal life. While for the Christian, the resurrection is a hope to be realized at the end of history, the resurrection is experienced in advance in the present. As it is written, "our inward man is renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16) by the working of the Holy Spirit through faith. The new life has already begun. But just as Paul says, "I die every day" (1 Cor. 15:31), this new life takes the form of constant dying. The living behavior wherein one perfectly lives the new life is always at the same time the experience of dying (*mortificatio*).⁹ In the practice of the Christian, so-called life appears as death, and new life is perfected within constant dying. Here we may call to mind Plato's teaching that "philosophy is a practicing of dying." For Plato, too, the practicing of dying while living is the highest way for a person. But in Plato's concept of practicing dying, there is no encounter with history. It is not obstructed by the corruption of the body while living; it takes place a-temporally, unrelated to history and transcending birth, death, and change, in seeing the eternal Ideas.

For the Christian, on the contrary, the progress of his new life that is dying and resurrecting day by day is deeply bound up with history. It also possesses an eschatological seal. The Christian participates in the new life of the resurrection by being baptized into Christ and dying together with Christ; but his complete resurrection and new life that is "to be like his glorious body" must wait for the end of history. Through Christ's death and resurrection, sin and evil have been conquered and the decisive battle is now over, but the day of final victory when all of humankind is reborn has not yet come. The Christian is always within the tension of the middle-time. Accordingly, the progress of new life that is a daily dying and resurrecting is the practice of *love* in the present of this middle-time which is supported by *faith* and *hope*.

Faith believes in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the second Adam, who has redeemed, by his death on the cross, the history of the human fall beginning with the first Adam and begun a new era by conquering even that death. The hope is to be resurrected in complete glory by the second coming of Christ at the end of history. The practice of love is

⁹ Brunner, p. 111.

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bound up with the task of history in the rebirth of all of humankind and, ultimately, is based on God who is hidden in Christ. The self-consciousness of death and the conquering of it in Christianity must be understood within this kind of practice of love. Therein we find a standpoint of faith deeply related to history, and immanently linked with ethical practice. This differs greatly from the a-historical intellectual, contemplative standpoint of Plato to whom philosophizing is a practicing of dying.

VI

It can be said that humankind has crystallized within Eastern Buddhism a self-consciousness of death which differs from the self-consciousness of death in Platonic philosophy and in Christianity which we have reviewed to this point.

It is a well known story that the Buddha, when asked about the existence of the soul after death, answered with silence. Buddhism teaches neither the imperishability of the soul nor the extinction of the soul. Buddhism originally did not recognize the existence of the soul distinguished from the body, and the problem of death was not understood to be solved merely in terms of immortality or non-extinction, and of eternal life. In Buddhism, resolution of the problem of death is sought in terms of no-birth and no-extinction, or unbornness and undying, that is, in terms of transcending "birth and extinction" or "birth and death" itself.

The "Verse on the Impermanence of All Things" (*Shogyō mujō ge* 諸行無常偈) in the *Nirvana Sutra* directly articulates the essence of Buddhism; it consists of the four lines:

諸行無常	All things are impermanent:
是生滅法	They appear and disappear;
生滅滅已	When an end is put
	to this appearance and disappearance,
寂滅為樂	The bliss of nirvana is realized.

The first two lines—"All things are impermanent: They appear and disappear"—express the Buddhist's cognition of actuality (the realities of the world). The third line—"When an end is put to this appearance and disappearance"—does not merely teach that there is non-extinc-

tion or immortality when *extinction* is overcome, but emphasizes the need to overcome *both* birth (appearance) and extinction (disappearance) as a duality. The last line—"The bliss of nirvana is realized" when this very fact of appearance and disappearance is transcended—teaches the attainment of nirvana which is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. Therefore the third line, "When an end is put to this appearance and disappearance," must be said to be the pivot causing present reality to be converted into nirvana.

"Appearance and disappearance" (*shōmetsu* 生滅) would seem to be an expression referring broadly to organic and inorganic things, but in reference to beings that have life, it is of course "birth-and-death" (*shōji* 生死). Consequently, the standpoint of Buddhism can be understood not from the perspective of attaining immortality by extinguishing death relative to life, but as the attainment of no-birth and no-death by extinguishing *birth and death* themselves—of that which has transcended birth and death (samsara) itself. The standpoint of Buddhism vividly comes out in the term "*no-birth*" or "unborn" (*fushō* 不生) which means neither immortal, nor non-extinction, nor eternal life, but a freedom from the duality of birth and death.

When human existence is said to be impermanent, it does not merely mean that it is impermanent because death exists over against life; it must mean that the very fact that there is birth-and-death is the true reality of impermanence. We are impermanent not merely because we are *perishable* existences, but precisely because we are existences that constantly are *born and die*. This constant being born and dying is called samsara. The essential point, then, is not release from death, but *release from birth-and-death*. When Plato speaks of immortality, he takes as his premise the fact that a person is mortal, that is, a perishable existence; and when Christianity speaks of eternal life, it takes life as the foundation. Certainly immortality could be attained if death could be extinguished. Eternal life could be realized if death could be conquered. But must we not say that these views are still one-sided, and that what is sought therein is still the extension of life in some form—that is, in a different transcendent dimension?

In Plato's case, however, immortality of the soul is not merely related to life after death, as we have seen above, but to pre-existence before birth as well. The soul is thought to transcend birth, death, and the changes of the body, and to be immortal and eternal through its ex-

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istence before birth and after death. The soul, being permanent and unchanging, has an Idea-like character. Indeed, when Plato says that the true philosopher practices dying while living, we find a common aspect between Plato's standpoint and Buddhism. But in Plato's case, to the extent the meaning of death is questioned, the meaning of birth and the meaning of coming to be born as a person, is not deeply questioned. The dualistic theory which conceives of the realm of the Ideas behind phenomena and the infinite behind the finite does not avoid causing Plato's grasp of the problem of death to be objective and contemplative. Therefore, is not non-being ultimately a kind of being, and the immortal nothing other than a transformed form of life?

On that point Christianity, which does not conceive of body and soul as merely dualistically opposed, but rather attempts to grasp human existence as a unity and understand it as a creature created from nothing, must be said to have been more thoroughgoing in its understanding of death. In Plato, who taught that when death presses upon a person, that which perishes is the body, while the soul concedes the place to that which must die and goes away and preserves its own Idea-like permanent nature, the human finitude and temporality cannot be said to have been fully realized. Christianity, on the contrary, holds that human beings and history begin together with the original sin as rebellion against the word of God, the absolute. The Christian is self-conscious, in an extremely acute way, of the finitude and temporality of man who is destined to die. All the more, the faith that one's sin and death are vanquished by the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection, and the hope in eternal life based thereon, must be said to be extremely profound.

Nevertheless, in that Christianity sets up God as creator, it has no place for "no-birth," or the "unborn." Fundamentally the creator expresses absolute life. God, the creator, is eternal life itself. It may be thought that for the Christian, while there is death and the hope of eternal life as victory over it, there is no self-consciousness of unbornness. But in the case of Christianity, can it not be understood that the character of being unborn applies to God, though not to man who is a creature? For God, the creator, creates all things while himself being uncreated. In other words, if we follow the phraseology of John Scotus Erigena, there is God who creates and is not created: *natura creans et non creata*. (In orthodox Christianity, however, God is not "neither

creating nor created"—*natura nec creata nec creans*.) But this uncreatedness is said only of God and not of man, the creature. Concerning us human beings, even though the phrases life and death, eternal life and new life, are used, in the case of Christianity they take the absolute life of God the creator as foundation, and possess the character of realization of divine life within history. The axis of realization of the will of this living God within history is precisely the cross of Jesus Christ. God who is the lord of life and death (2 Cor. 1:9) has had his only son Jesus Christ die on the cross and rise again from the dead. It can even be understood that in this death and resurrection of Christ, God himself experiences the test of death and thus crushes death.¹⁰ Therein death is truly vanquished and the new age (*aiōn*) of the resurrection begins. This is, however, realized in Jesus Christ, the son of God, and does not apply directly to all people. Although it does not take a dualistic relation of body and soul, Christianity nevertheless grasps God and man in a special kind of dualistic relation, that is, as creator and creature or as redeemer and the redeemed. In other words, the horizontal dualism between body and soul is overcome, but the vertical dualism between God and man is retained. In the cross of Jesus Christ, the transcendence of God and the immanence of man interpenetrates in perfect concreteness. In his death and resurrection, a subjective standpoint of transcendence-qua-immanence is revealed, and taking this point as pivot, history is transformed into eternal life by overcoming sin and death. These things themselves, however, are all possible within the transcendent nature of God. This transcendent nature of God, in the present case, is the eternal life of God. Herein would seem to lie the reason why "no-birth" or "unborn" never becomes seriously problematic in Christianity.

VII

In Buddhism, on the contrary, both "undying" and "unborn" have become important issues. The Buddhist seeks not merely no-death (the immortal), but "no-birth-and-no-death." As I have stated above, this is precisely because the Buddhist does not understand human existence

¹⁰ Alan Richardson, ed., *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1950), p. 60; cf. Heb. 2:14 ff.

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merely as subject to death, but grasps it as *that which is birth-and-death* or *living-dying*. Throughout the Buddhist scriptures we meet with expressions which regard the reality of human being as that which is born and dies. In early Buddhism, it is well known that included in the "noble truth of suffering" there is the teaching of the four sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death; and in the "twelve causes," there is the teaching of old age, dying, and birth as the point of departure for investigating human illusions. In the *Śārangama sūtra*, it is written: "After birth there is death, after death there is birth, birth and birth, death and death, like a wheel of fire, it never stops" (vol. III). In the *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi-śāstra* it is written: "While one has not yet attained true enlightenment, he is always in a dream; therefore the Buddha teaches the long night of birth and death" (vol. VII). Again in the *Sukhāvati-vyūha*: "Birth and death turn in endless cycles" (vol. I). Other such expressions which grasp the form of human beings who are birth-and-death are too numerous to cite: "The realm of birth and death," "The cloud of birth and death," "The shore of birth and death," "The ocean of birth and death," "The sorrowful ocean of birth and death," "The prison of birth and death," "The mud of birth and death," "The bonds of birth and death," "The stream of birth and death," "The wheel of birth and death," etc. It seems to go without saying that the aim of Buddhism lies in "plucking out the root of all the hardship and suffering of birth-and-death" (*Sukhāvati-vyūha sūtra*).

How, then, can one pluck out "the root of the hardship and suffering of birth-and-death"? Birth-and-death as suffering signifies attachment to the existence of the self that is ceaseless birth-and-death, and thereby signifies a bondage by birth-and-death. That all things are impermanent is one of the fundamental teachings of the Buddha. There is nothing permanent and unchanging, nothing that endures as it is. Within such impermanence, however, we ceaselessly seek what is permanent and infinite. This fundamental desire is called "longing" (*tanhā*). All sufferings arise as a result of this longing, for the dissatisfaction of longing is suffering. What, then, is this longing based on? It is based precisely on ignorance (*avidyā*) of the true nature of human life that is impermanent. It is precisely this fundamental ignorance that lies at the root of human existence; it is the ultimate condition that is not grounded on anything more ultimate. Accordingly, when this fun-

damental ignorance is extinguished, longing is extinguished as well, and all suffering in turn disappears.

In reference to the question of birth-and-death, if one is not attached to the existence of the self which is birth-and-death, and if one clearly awakens to the fact of birth-and-death and impermanence, one should be able to transcend the sufferings of birth-and-death. It is written in the earliest Buddhist scriptures:

Seeing the terrible results of attachment produced and caused by birth and death, they achieve unattachment to the causations of birth and death, and experience release.

Achieving peace and composure they rejoice and experience nirvana in this life; they transcend all anger and fear, and transcend all sufferings. (*Majjhima-Nikāya*, III, p. 187-g)

In Buddhism, there is no thought of struggling with death, overcoming it, and thereby becoming victorious over it. For the Buddhist, death is, of course, painful and sorrowful, but as long as he or she is a person, who is birth-and-death, death is totally unavoidable. Neither disgracefully attached to life nor audaciously attempting to conquer death, the Buddhist attempts quietly to thoroughly realize the stark "principle of birth-and-death." The Buddhist is fully aware of the fact of birth-and-death and impermanence. Therein lies the way along which one transcends birth-and-death while living in birth-and-death. The Buddhist does not conquer death; he frees himself from—is emancipated from—birth-and-death. In that sense, the death of the Buddha under the twin *sāla* trees is diametrically opposed to the death of Jesus on the cross. In the death of the expiring Jesus who, while nailed to the cross, emitted the endlessly agonizing cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" people cannot fail to be deeply moved by personally feeling the severity of the suffering of death symbolized by the man Jesus. I have already elaborated the point above that the Christian faith consists in believing that in this death and resurrection of Christ, "Jesus our Lord . . . was put to death for our trespasses, and raised for our justification" (Rom. 4:24-25). But in the case of the Buddha, there is no such anguish of death and no victory over death by resurrection.¹¹

¹¹ There is a kind of resurrection story in Buddhism, too, about the appearance of

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In his entering into nirvana, his death seems to have been far closer to the death of Socrates who calmly took the hemlock and quietly met death. Socrates willingly died believing that by death the soul is released from the body, returns to the world of the pure Ideas, and participates in eternal wisdom. But from the original standpoint of Buddhism I have cited above, Socrates' death is still not a true awareness or right seeing of the principle of birth-and-death and impermanence; even if it is Idea-like, the desire for the immortal soul in the next life cannot avoid being a "longing." This seems to be unavoidable as long as Plato sees the Ideas as existing behind present reality, while taking the perspective of a contemplative dualism.

VIII

It seems entirely natural for Buddhism, which seeks not mere overcoming of death but release from birth-and-death, to thematize not the immortal, but the unborn and undying, that is, nirvana which is beyond birth and death. Although the Buddhist clearly perceives birth-and-death, he or she does not understand the unavoidability of birth-and-death contemplatively or follow the determination of birth-and-death negatively. Rather the Buddhist is taught to awaken to the original nature that is free from birth and death. Dōgen's statement, "To clarify birth and to clarify death is for the Buddhist the single most important issue," also exhibits this kind of positive sense. Consequently the Buddhist notion of "no-birth" or "unborn" does not indicate the notion of *not being born*. It means to transcend and be released from birth-and-death. Not merely no-birth relative to no-death, but no-birth-and-no-death (*fushō fushi* 不生不死) constitutes the true meaning of "no-birth" or "unborn" (*fushō* 不生). Only when precisely this kind of "unborn" becomes the existential subject does there arise the experience of true release which is emancipated from birth-and-death while being birth-and-death. The resolution of the problem of death which Buddhism seeks lies herein.

Shakyamuni from the golden casket: But this story is hardly essential to Buddhist teaching, unlike the resurrection of Jesus Christ which is essential to the Christian teaching, and actually constitutes the core of its faith. This story may be interpreted merely as a kind of legend customarily attached to the biography of a great religious personality.

In Buddhism, the expression “unborn” is widely employed. For example, at the outset of the Mādhyamika philosophy, which is considered to have clarified the fundamental standpoint of Mahayana Buddhism, Nāgārjuna expounded the Middle Way of the eightfold negation and clarified the reason why all dharmas “have no self nature and are empty” thereby.¹² The Middle Way of the eightfold negation can be condensed into one phrase: “unbornness” (*fushō*). In the Hua-yen (Kegon) school it is said: “No-birth of a single thought (*ichinen fushō* 一念不生), precisely this is the Buddha” (*Kegon gokyōsho*, I). Again, in the Shingon school, it is said: “*A-kāra* (ultimate Reality) is originally unborn” (*a-ji honfushō* 阿字本不生). In the Shingon teaching of the Ten Stages of Mind, the seventh stage, “The awakened mind is unborn mind” (*kakushin fushōshin* 覺心不生心), teaches that “one who awakens to the fact that this mind is essentially unborn gradually enters into the gate of *a-kāra* (*a-ji mon* 阿字門)” (Kūkai, *Jūjū shinron*). In the Pure Land teaching, T’an-luan writes that “being born in the Pure Land” (*ōjō* 往生) has the meaning of the birth of “no-birth” (*Ching-t’u lun chu*). In Shinran’s *Kōsō wasan* there are the words: “Since depending on the Tathāgata’s pure original vow, there is the birth of no-birth” (*Nyorai shōjō hongan no mushō no shō narikereba* 如来清淨本願の無生の生なりければ).

Indeed in Ch’an, or Zen, “unborn” is strongly emphasized in an extremely subjective and realistic form. Bankei expounds *Fushōzen* (the unborn Zen) in the words: “In everyone there is the clear and unborn Buddha mind. Do not darken it; be unborn.”¹³ Passing over this quote for the moment, even the words used as a *kōan* since ancient times, “See your Original Face before the birth of your father and mother,” do not merely mean to awaken to the self of no-birth relative to no-death, but to awaken to the self of no-birth-and-no-death, the original Self which transcends birth-and-death. Huang-po said that “if there is no seeking, that is the unborn mind; if there is no attachment that is the undying; unborn and undying are precisely the Buddha.” He then warned a monk: “If you desire to attain the becoming of Buddhahood . . . only study non-seeking and non-attachment” (*Ch’uan-hsin fa-yao* 伝心).

¹² The eightfold negation is “neither birth nor extinction, neither interruption nor permanence, neither sameness nor difference, neither coming in nor going out.”

¹³ Norman Waddell (tr.), *Unborn: The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984).

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法要). Indeed, "when emotion and cognition are extinguished, birth-and-death are empty, when birth-and-death are empty, the way of Buddha is attained" (*T'ien-mu Chung-feng ho-shang kuang-lu* 天目中峯和尚広縁). The words of Kanzan Egen, "Within myself there is no birth-and-death" would also be an expression of the self-awakening to unbornness in the true sense. This kind of realization of no-birth-and-no-death is nirvana in the Buddhist sense.

However, if one empties this birth-and-death and goes no further than a nirvana which has escaped from birth-and-death, one is descending to a realization of no-birth-and-no-death *relative to* birth-and-death. In that case, no-birth-and-death, unbornness itself, would be grasped objectively and would be attached as "unbornness." In this limitation, that would precisely be to go no further than a negative kind of quietism. However, Buddhism does not teach one to escape from birth-and-death and to enter into *nirvana* by not dwelling in birth-and-death, but to return to the world of birth-and-death by *not dwelling even in nirvana*. To enter into *nirvana* and yet not remain there, but to sojourn in the garden of birth-and-death, is *true nirvana*. Consequently, even though we speak of transcending birth-and-death, or emptying birth-and-death, this hardly means to get out of or flee from birth-and-death. It means to penetrate birth-and-death itself through and through. By doing so, one transcends birth-and-death from within. Accordingly, *nirvana* cannot be something apart from birth-and-death. Instead, *birth-and-death as it is, is nirvana*. Therein lies the self-awakening to unbornness. Dōgen writes:

This present birth and death itself is the Life of Buddha. If you attempt to reject it with distaste, you are losing thereby the Life of Buddha. If you abide in it, attaching to birth and death, you also lose the Life of Buddha, and leave yourself with [only] the appearance of Buddha. You only attain the mind of Buddha when there is no hating [of birth and death] and no desiring [for nirvana].¹⁴

Consequently in true *nirvana*, the subject of unbornness is birth-and-death precisely as no-birth-and-no-death, and functions in the realm of

¹⁴ Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō Shōji* (Birth and Death), tr. Norman Waddell and Abe Masao, *Eastern Buddhist* Vol. V, No. 1 (Spring 1972), p. 79.

samsara. A poem of Shidō Munan, Zen master of seventeenth-century Japan, says,

While living, become a dead man
Thoroughly dead
Then do as you wilt;
All will be all right.

This is a direct expression of the point I am trying to make. It differs both from Plato's "practicing of dying" and from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Do we not find therein the most thoroughgoing self-consciousness of death and a way of resolution which transcends every kind of dualism and which is directly verified in the immediacy of the present?

IX

Nevertheless, is not this kind of Buddhist standpoint reducible, like the standpoint of Plato, to an a-temporal, a-historical world? And in that case, is not the meaning of history ultimately robbed, and ethics also excluded? These reservations have often been brought against Buddhism in comparison with Christianity; they are problems to which Buddhists must earnestly address themselves.

Christianity is a religion based upon the revelation of God; it rests upon faith that the word of God has been revealed *within history*. On that faith is grounded a view of history and an eschatological view of ethics in which the meaning, direction, and purpose of history is given by revelation. It is only natural that Buddhism, which stands not on the revelation of God but on human self-awakening, does not have a view of history and a view of ethics in the same sense as Christianity. Is there, then, an historical view and an ethical view special to Buddhism? It may be thought that, at least up to the present time, Buddhism has lacked a theologically systematized view of history. Profound philosophies of time have existed in Buddhism for a long time, but it would seem that human existence has not been understood as essentially historical existence, and the truth of Buddhism has not been accepted as linked to historical self-consciousness—with a notable exception of the doctrine of the three stages of the Dharma.¹⁵ This would certainly seem to indicate a lack of historical consciousness. But it may be

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thought that a very thoroughgoing self-consciousness of primal-history (*Urgeschichte*) is implicit within Buddhism. I should like to touch upon this point very briefly in relation to the problem of birth-and-death.

I stated above that, in Buddhism, man is grasped not merely as a perishable being, but as an existence which is birth-and-death. *To be birth-and-death* fundamentally is understood as the "birth-and-death of the moment" (*setsuna-shōji* 刹那生死). The "birth-and-death of one life time" (*ichigo no shōji* 一期の生死) can be understood only on the basis of this "birth-and-death of the moment." Accordingly, that we human beings are existences that are birth-and-death, means that we are existences which *are born and die at every moment*. This is the "principle of birth-and-death." Being attached to life and loathing death, to be deluded in birth-and-death, arises from a lack of self-awakening to this principle of birth-and-death. On the other hand, to enter into *nirvana* by transcending birth-and-death is nothing other than self-awakening to this principle of momentary life-and-death. Therein the Buddhist is born and dies moment after moment and enters into *nirvana* moment after moment. Accordingly, the Mahayana emphasis that birth-and-death (*samsara*) is *nirvana* does not mean that *samsara* is simply identical with *nirvana*. Rather birth-and-death is thoroughly birth-and-death; *nirvana* is thoroughly *nirvana*. When it is, however, truly subjectively or existentially realized that *samsara* is the birth-and-death at each and every moment that cannot be objectified and substantialized, *samsara* is transcended from within and turns into *nirvana* at each and every moment. *Nirvana* is fundamentally *nirvana of the moment* (*setsuna-nehan* 刹那涅槃). If that were not the case, then *nirvana* itself would thereby be substantialized. True *nirvana* is "nirvana of the moment," which is realized moment after moment. *Samsara* ceaselessly turns into *nirvana* because it is *samsara* of the moment.

¹⁵ The doctrine of right, semblance, and final (*shōzōmatsu* 正像末) Dharma refers to the three periods of the Buddhist teaching after the Buddha's decease. It was especially influential during the Sui and T'ang dynasties in China and during the Heian and Kamakura periods in Japan. There are different views as to the duration of these periods. According to the one prevalent in the Kamakura period, the first period, believed to last 1,000 years, is called the right Dharma (*shōbō* 正法), in which Buddhist doctrine, practice, and enlightenment all exist; the second period of 1,000 years is the period of the semblance, "imitative" Dharma (*zōhō* 像法), in which doctrine and practices exist without enlightenment; the third and last period of 10,000 years is that of the latter or final Dharma (*mappō* 末法), in which only the doctrine remains.

Nirvana ceaselessly returns to samsara precisely because it is nirvana of the moment. Samsara and nirvana are thus united through mutual negation at each moment. The unextended, subjective point where samsara and nirvana are mutually united through negation is nothing other than the *moment* (*ksana*). This moment is the place where we are born and die in actual reality, and is the openness in which *nirvana* subjectively takes place.

Indeed, moment in this sense is not an extremely small amount of time. It is the moment of the "now" wherein the infinite past and infinite future are self-consciously included and self-consciously transcended. All time of past, present, and future are transcended precisely in the moment of the "now." The eternal is realized at present, and the wheel of birth-and-death which has no beginning or end is broken and converted into the silence and purity of *nirvana* which is boundless and inexhaustible. Moreover, as long as the moment is the moment, there is transition from moment to moment while each moment is thoroughly independent in itself. There is endless passage. That, however, is not a simple immediate continuity (*renzoku* 連続) but discontinuous succession (*sōzoku* 相續).

Precisely because moments are essentially discontinuously successive, the birth-and-death of the moment incessantly turns into *nirvana*, and *nirvana* incessantly returns to birth-and-death. Birth-and-death is emptied moment after moment; *nirvana* is realized moment after moment. The expression, "Only after experiencing the Great Death is one reborn" also indicates the decisive moment in which birth-and-death is transcended and the dialectical identity of *samsara-is-nirvana* is subjectively realized. The moments before the Great Death are the moments of flux; the moments after the Great Death are the moments of release. The former are moments grasped by substantializing them such that they are immediately continuous. Consequently, the momentariness of birth-and-death cannot be realized therein; birth-and-death becomes an object of attachment. The principle of momentary birth-and-death is realized in the moment of release. The mutual conversion of *samsara-is-nirvana* is subjectively and existentially realized to be successive, moment after moment, in spite of the discontinuity of each moment.

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X

This kind of Buddhist standpoint, even if it thematizes the relation of time and eternity, may perhaps be still unable to grasp the problem of history, the essence and meaning of history. Time is not directly history. The nature of time and the nature of history must be distinguished. Time only becomes "history" when the factor of spatiality (concretely, "worldhood," *Weltlichkeit*) is added to it, and is permeated by the self-consciousness of the uniqueness (*Einmalichkeit*) of time.

Since ancient times, Buddhism has used the terms *loka* and *lokadhātu*, which mean "society" (*seken* 世間) or "world" (*sekai* 世界). The word *seken* simultaneously connotes spatiality as a *place* and temporality as *flux*, and is, needless to say, the world in which sentient beings dwell. "The impermanence of the world" is a fundamental thesis of Buddhism, and it cannot be separated from the birth-and-death and impermanence of sentient beings. That all sentient beings undergo the flux of birth-and-death means that they exist in society (*seken*) or the world (*sekai*) as sunk down into the flux. Thus, the expression, "to leave or transcend the world" (*shusseken* 出世間) truly means to transcend this kind of flux, to be released from the flux of birth-and-death.

For Buddhism, history is "the history of 'lokadhātu' (the world)," "the history of being sunk down in the flux." It is the "history of the impermanence of the world," the "history of the flux of birth-and-death of sentient beings." This flux is beginningless and endless. Because there is neither creation nor an end of time, history for Buddhism does not have a particular direction. It has no direction, yet history is not directionless. Therein lies the profundity of the impermanence of history. However, when we once truly penetrate the birth-and-death of the moment and transcend it, the history of the flux of birth-and-death is also transcended. What is revealed therein is no longer "the history of the world" but the "history of transcending the world" (*shusseken no rekishi* 出世間の歴史), no longer "the history of samsara" but "the history of nirvana" which is emancipation.

As stated above, however, just as *samsara* and *nirvana* are mutually united through negation and succeed each other moment by moment in the self-consciousness of the Buddhist, so too the history of birth-and-death and the history of emancipation are mutually united through

negation in the moment and are subjectively (discontinuously) successive. Accordingly, "the history of transcending the world" does not take place on the other-shore at the end of the "history of the world." We self-awaken to the impermanence of the world and the flux of birth-and-death of all sentient beings by penetrating the *birth-and-death of the present moment of the self*. In *that present moment*, although the history of the world is thoroughly the history of the world, its impermanence is transcended from within and it turns into the history of transcending the world. Moreover, at the same time, the history of transcending the world, while completely being the history of transcending the world, turns into the history of the world in which one experiences the process of birth-and-death. It is precisely the subject of this dialectical interchange of the history of the world and the history of transcending the world who experiences the momentary nirvana while experiencing the momentary birth-and-death. It is this subject who acts while bound by neither *samsara* nor *nirvana*, yet freely goes out and enters into both *samsara* and *nirvana*. Therein lies the foundation that grounds creative activity which creates history by transcending history; therein lies the basis of the Buddhist ethic: "However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them."

Indeed, there is neither a beginning nor an end to history in Buddhism, which takes the impermanence of the world and self-awakening to the momentary birth-and-death as its foundation. The moment and history dialectically co-arise and co-perish. In *any moment* of the endless development of history there is the endless return of history. In every moment, development toward the historical future is at the same time a return to the origin of history. History in Buddhism is "the history of the moment." It is also "the history of discontinuous succession," which is a succession being neither of the past as in Platonic reminiscence nor of the future as in Christian resurrection. It is of the absolute present as a discontinuous succession of the moment. Thus may we not conclude the following? Greek history is a history of return and reminiscence; Christian history is a history of instants¹⁶ and of

¹⁶ I consider it crucial to clarify the difference between the "instant" (*Augenblick*) in Christianity such as used by Kierkegaard, and the Buddhist notion of "moment" (*ksana*) in order to clarify the differences between the theory of time and history of each religion.

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repetition. Buddhist history, in contrast, is the history of the moment and discontinuous succession.

We have gradually come this far in our inquiry into the self-consciousness of death in the East and the West. Yet the problem of death, no matter how much words are piled up, cannot in the end be touched in its reality. In reference to the question of birth-and-death, as Tao-wu answered to the question of Chien-yuan, "I won't tell! I won't tell!" must be the only correct answer.¹⁷

TRANSLATED BY DAVID DILWORTH

¹⁷ Tao-wu 道吾, a Zen master of the late T'ang dynasty, went one day with his disciple Chien-yuan 漸源 to visit a family in mourning. Chien-yuan was a young monk seeking for truth, and was especially concerned with the problem of life and death. To learn what was in his master's mind, Chien-yuan knocked on the coffin and said, "Living or dead?" Tao-wu instantly responded, "Living? I tell you not! Dead? I tell you not!" "Why not?" asked the disciple. To this the master replied, "I won't tell! I won't tell!" (*Iwaji, iwaji* 道じ道じ). Chien-yuan, however, had not yet come to the point of realization for himself. When they were halfway on their homeward walk, he again accosted his master, saying, "Master, please tell me about it. If you don't I will strike you down." The master responded, "As for striking, it is up to you. As for talking, I have nothing to tell you." Thereupon the disciple struck him. Had Tao-wu at that time proclaimed the immortality of soul or eternal life to Chien-yuan, the disciple might have been satisfied. But the master had repeated the same negative answer, and Chien-yuan was quietly sent away. Later, he went to Shih-shuang 石霜, one of Tao-wu's disciples, and telling him his story, he asked the monk to enlighten him on the matter. Shih-shuang also said, "Living? I tell you not! Dead? I tell you not!" "Why won't you tell me?" demanded Chien-yuan. "I won't tell! I won't tell!" repeated Shih-shuang. This instantly opened up Chien-yuan's mind. See *Pi-yen-lu* (Blue Cliff Record), Case 55. See also D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, Second Series (1933), p. 219 ff. and Masao Abe, " 'Life and Death' and 'Good and Evil' in Zen," *Criterion*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1969), p. 10.